

Something that really, really annoys me is going into a shop, approaching the counter, and being greeted by someone behind the counter chatting on the phone. I say “greeted”, but it’s more likely that the nearest I will get to a greeting is a slight backward tilt of the head indicating “yes - what do you want?” No actual words are forthcoming as (s)he is giving 95% of their attention to their phone conversation.

If I’m not in a desperate hurry to buy whatever I came in for then I give them about 20 seconds to finish the call or put the phone down. If that doesn’t happen I just turn on my heel and walk back out again.



David Cameron has banned mobile phones in cabinet meetings.

This happened again today and I was waiting in the supermarket queue a while later, wondering about my over-inflated sense of my own importance, when I realised that the queue was being held up by the person at the front holding a phone conversation instead of packing her shopping.

I successfully fought the urge to point out to her that half a dozen people in the queue behind her were growing old while she was arranging her child-minder (or whatever it was), but it led me to thinking about other situations where etiquette has a part to play in the way we use modern electronic devices.

The more I think it about, the more subtle the etiquette appears to be. Consider netbooks and tablet pcs. These days, you can start to feel inadequate drinking coffee in Costa Coffee (or wherever) if you’re not giving most of your attention to a netbook, an ipad, or similar. It’s hard to imagine anyone being upset by this. I don’t charge my computer clients enough to be able to afford expensive restaurants, but it’s my guess that you wouldn’t whip out your ipad in The Ivy.

And what of answering mobile phones calls or texts when we are in social situations? We seem to evolve quite subtle rules for whether or not we answer it depending on who’s calling,

who we're with, where we are, and what time of the day it is. And should the phone have been switched on in the first place?



I often find myself agonising over whether I should answer the phone in social situations. If it's a client calling then they may have an urgent problem, but I don't work 24/7 and I don't want to get my brain in gear at 9pm. And I don't want to appear rude either to the client who's ringing or the people I'm with. I've never managed to establish my own etiquette for such occasions, let alone work out what others should do. I do know that what I'd prefer to happen is that I ignore the call, pick up a voicemail when it's convenient, and then respond in a manner that's appropriate to the situation I'm

in and the problem the caller has.

During the working day, I try to be pragmatic about answering the mobile when I'm with a client. If I'm training the client or talking to them then the phone doesn't get answered. If I'm just watching a program install - or something similar - then I do answer the phone. Good manners, and remembering who's paying for my time, usually provide enough of a guide. Why is it that so many people seem to think that if their mobile phone rings they have to answer it - immediately and irrespective of the circumstances?

When I was studying Computer Systems Analysis and Design, I do remember that it was impressed on me that I should ask the client if it's alright with them if I take notes when I'm in a meeting with them. I confess that these days I tend only to do that during initial discussions with potential new clients (ie I'm on my best behaviour). Does that mean I'm being rude with existing computer clients if I start taking notes without checking with them first on every occasion? These things make my brain hurt sometimes.

I've also had conversations with people about whether it is "appropriate" to get notebooks and phones out in business meetings. I've always played that one by ear - if there's something on the phone or notebook that I need to see for the benefit of the meeting then I wouldn't hesitate. And if other people put all their toys on the table at the beginning of the meeting then I'm not going to be left out. On the other hand, answering texts or emails during a meeting seems to me to be a complete no-no, and yet I've seen plenty of people who do it without any apparent thought for the impression it gives.



Since this stuff is all new then the etiquette surrounding it is all new, so you might think we'd all develop the same etiquette. Yet, it does definitely seem to me that the older someone is, the less likely they are to allow the technology to get in the way of normal, face to face, communication and interaction. Does that reflect the fact that we probably become more polite and considerate as we get older - or is it just me being Victor Meldrew again?

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